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ABSTRACT

In assessing the concept of sex-role typing of adult activities, this study required subjects to add male or female adult figures to 12 pictures illustrating different activities. Randomly chosen, participants included ten 4-year-olds enrolled in a female teacher's class and twenty 6-year-olds (10 from a male teacher's and 10 from a female teacher's class). Results suggested (1) that children's concept of sex-role typing changes between the ages of 4 and 6 years in the direction of greater conformity with traditional stereotypes, and (2) that presenting children with personal experiences of atypical role occupants has some effect, although perhaps less than might be anticipated. (Author/BJD)

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Changes in Children's Concept of Sex Role Typing of Some Adult Activities after Two Years in School

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Abstract

This study assesses 4-year-olds' concept of sex role typing of some adult activities and compares it with that of 6-year-olds (from a male and from a female teacher's class) who have had two years in school. The experimental task required subjects to choose male or female adult figures to add to pictures showing different activities. The results suggest that children's concept of sex role typing changes towards greater conformity with traditional stereotypes between 4 and 6 years, and that presenting children with personal experience of untypical role occupants has some, although small, effect.

Changes in Children's Concept of Sex Role Typing of Some Adult Activities after Two Years in School

By 4 years of age children know their own sex identity and they are able to distinguish sex-appropriate behaviours and activities for themselves and others (Kuhn, Nash & Brucken, 1978). This knowledge of sex roles is learnt during their early years from experience and observation, including from television and from books, but chiefly under the influence of their parents' attitudes and behaviour. When they enter school their concept of sex roles will be influenced by their teachers, their peers, their reading books and other curriculum materials, and by the general social structure of the school.

In this study 4-year-olds' concept of sex role typing of some adult activities was assessed and compared with that of 6-year-olds who had had two years in school. The 6-year-olds were from a female teacher's class and from a male teacher's class. Their concept of sex role typing was assessed by having them choose male or female adult figures to add to pictures in which two children needed help with what they were doing. It was hypothesized that the younger children's choices would be less stereotyped than the older ones' who had had two years together in school. It was also hypothesized that the 6-year-olds from the male teacher's class would show some effect of exposure to an untypical role model.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 30 children from a public school in a middle class neighbourhood of Toronto. There were 10 4-year-olds who had been in school (half days) for three months and 20 6-year-olds who had been in

school for two years (half days) and three months (full days). Of the 6-year-olds 10 were from a female teacher's class and 10 from a male teacher's class. The 4-year-olds had a female teacher. The children were chosen at random from each of the three classes, except it was determined that there were 5 girls and 5 boys in each group of 10.

Materials

There were six large coloured pictures each showing a girl and a boy engaged in some activity in which the two children were equally involved (see Table 1). There were also twelve cut-out pictures of adults (six male and six female) sized appropriately to fit into the large pictures.

Table 1

Pictures of Children's Activities Requiring an Adult Helper

1. Travelling in the back of a car	(car)	stereotypically
2. Carrying ladder towards kitten in tree	(ladder)	masculine
3. Visiting a zoo	(zoo)	
4. Shopping in a supermarket	(shopping)	
5. Preparing food in a kitchen	(kitchen)	stereotypically
6. Sitting in a classroom	(school)	feminine

In Table 1 the pictures are listed in a sequence from the most stereotypically masculine to the most stereotypically feminine activity for the adult helpers, which was assessed using four adult raters (two male, two female). This rating accords with 5- to 15-year-olds' perceptions of parental roles reported by Goldman and Goldman (1983).

Procedure

Children were tested individually, audiotaping each session. The task was introduced as a game; the child was given the twelve pictures of adults (randomly mixed) and asked to set them out so they could all be seen. S/he was then shown one of the large pictures and asked what

the girl and boy in the picture were doing. In conversation with the experimenter it was decided that the children might need some help in their activity (for example, to drive the car or to pay for the groceries etc.) and the child was asked to choose one of the cut-out adults to put into the picture to help the children with what they were doing. After s/he had made the choice s/he was asked why that person had been chosen. This was repeated with all six pictures, presented in random order. After the game the child was encouraged to talk a little about his or her family and school.

Results

The sequence 'car' - 'ladder' - 'zoo' - 'shopping' - 'kitchen' - 'school' was assessed by the adult raters as representing a transition from stereotypically masculine activities to stereotypically feminine activities for the adult helpers. The data from the 6-year-olds reflect this ordering, as do, but less clearly, the data from the 4-year-olds (see Table 2).

Table 2

Percentage of Subjects Choosing Male Adult for Each Activity

	4-year-olds	6-year-olds
car	70	85
ladder	40	80
zoo	40	45
shopping	50	45
kitchen	60	35
school	10	15

Taking the activities in the 'car', 'ladder' and 'zoo' pictures as masculine activities for the adult helpers and those in the 'shopping', 'kitchen' and 'school' pictures as feminine ones, 69% of the 6-year-olds' choices were sex-typed, and 55% of the 4-year-olds' choices; this

difference is only significant at the 0.1 level ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 3.55$, $p < .1$) [1]. However all but one 4-year-old chose a female adult for the 'school' picture; all of the other pictures illustrated activities which parents might perform, and considering only these activities the 6-year-olds' choices were significantly more sex-typed than the 4-year-olds' ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 4.50$, $p < .05$). There was very little difference in sex-typing between the choices made by the 6-year-olds from the female teacher's class and those from the male teacher's class ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 0.35$, $p > .05$). However the female teacher's pupils all chose a female adult for the 'school' picture, whereas in the male teacher's group three children chose a male.

Where there was a difference between the younger and older groups it was usually because of the younger children's choosing an adult of the same sex as themselves rather than the cultural stereotype. Overall the 4-year-olds were more likely to choose an adult of the same sex as themselves than were the 6-year-olds: for the 4-year-olds 70% of the girls' choices were of females and 60% of the boys' choices were of males ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 5.45$, $p < .05$), whereas for the 6-year-olds 55% of the girls' choices were of females and 57% of the boys' choices were of males ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 1.63$, $p > .05$). Also where there was a difference between the choices made by boys and girls in the same group it was because the children chose adults of the same sex as themselves, although these differences were not significant.

When asked for reasons for their choices the 4-year-olds were more likely to give responses relating to the job to be done (e.g.

1) There is controversy over the use of the chi-square statistic in this way (Paludi, 1982) but in this study the sample size is too small to permit separate analyses of each item.

"because they need a grown-up to help them do it") or relating to themselves (e.g. "cos I want to" "I like this one") or to give no reason (or just "because"). However their choices did not appear to be made at random: all but one 4-year-old chose a female adult for the 'school' picture. The 6-year-olds gave more sex-typed reasons (e.g. "because teachers are ladies" "because he's the father" "because he's like a fireman" "because he's a man" etc.), although some of their reasons too were neutral or irrelevant.

Discussion

The data presented above suggest that children's concept of sex role typing of some adult activities does change between 4 and 6 years, and that this change is in the direction of greater conformity to traditional stereotypes. That the 4-year-olds did not show such definite categorising of activities according to traditional stereotypes as did the 6-year-olds could reflect the diversity of their parents' attitudes and their pre-school experiences, little modified by their few months in school, or it could reflect their earlier stage of cognitive development (Kohlberg, 1966). Or it may represent a lesser understanding of what was required of them in the task and a random choosing of adult cut-outs, although this did not seem to be so: as recorded above, all but one 4-year-old chose a female adult for the 'school' picture. It is likely that their choices reflected their concepts of sex roles, whether or not they could verbalize reasons for making them.

The choices made for the 'school' picture and for the 'car' picture were the most stereotyped in both age groups. It is interesting that for these two activities a term could be (and often was) applied to the person performing the activity: that is, for 'car' -- driver

(= male) and for 'school' -- teacher (= female). Perhaps the labelling of activities/occupations, even with neutral terms such as these, facilitates sex role typing.

The choices made by the 6-year-olds from the female teacher's class and those from the male teacher's class were very similar. Both groups chose the stereotype twice as often as the non-stereotype, and more often gave sex-typed reasons for their choices than the 4-year-olds did. These children, as well as being older, had spent more time in school, and more time together. As Oakley (1972) says, "despite the obvious variation in the way parents behave towards towards their children, there is remarkable consensus among young children in their conceptions of gender roles"[2] (p. 183). This consensus is seen in the choices made in this experimental task; the children seemed to share the same cultural stereotypes, sometimes in spite of parental models: for example, a few children whose mothers drove them to school every day chose a male figure for the 'car' picture, even saying "because ladies don't drive", and one child, whose father made lunch for him every day while his mother was at work, chose a female adult for the 'kitchen' picture. As Hartley and Klein (1959) wrote over 20 years ago, "responses to questions concerning what 'most men' and 'most women' do are quite different from what happens in [children's] own primary groups. It is almost as if they discount their immediate personal experiences in favour of some impersonal criterion impinging on them from an unspecified external source" (p. 63).

The 6-year-olds in the study reported here had had more exposure to such 'external sources'; the greater number of sex-typed choices that

2) It is perhaps preferable to refer to gender differences and gender role, rather then to use the commoner terms "sex differences" and "sex role", in order to emphasize that these are societally ascribed, rather than innate, differences and roles (Archer & Lloyd, 1982).

they made may have resulted from greater exposure to socializing influences for which the school is responsible. Books are an important source of influence and school readers often portray males and females in traditional roles (Women on Words & Images, 1972). Teachers are another important influence; the children's choice of adult for the 'school' picture is interesting in this regard: the female teacher's group all chose a female adult which accords with the traditional stereotype and with their own experience. In the male teacher's group three children chose a male adult and seven chose a female; at least there was some awareness that either was possible: one child said "I know teachers can be men but I want to choose a lady", however another child (also from the male teacher's class) said "I'll choose the one with the green dress because teachers usually wear green dresses"!

Another aspect of the 6-year-olds' longer time in school is perhaps reflected in the greater hesitation some of them made before choosing, which appeared to be associated with their desire to get it right; a number of them had to be told "there isn't a right or wrong, it's whichever you want to choose". This seemed to be a surprising idea to some 6-year-olds in a school setting, and may perhaps be associated with the consensus in their concept of sex roles.

This study is too small to permit definite conclusions to be drawn, but it does demonstrate a method of investigation that can easily be used with young children. In addition it does suggest that children's concept of sex role typing becomes more stereotyped after two years in school, and it suggests that presenting children with personal experience of untypical role occupants has some effect, although perhaps less than might be anticipated.

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